

By Paul Engle

I

His shadow casts a shadow casting flames.  
Crowds in our monstrous cities meet and cry.  
Their faceless faces speak their nameless names.  
The hateful, cracked assassin kneels and aims,  
But even while the bitter bullets fly,  
His shadow casts a shadow casting flames.  
His answer to his question hurts and maims:  
What can I do for my country? I can die.  
Their faceless faces speak their nameless names.  
He left his gay exuberance in games.  
Running not beach or field but the crazed sky,  
His shadow casts a shadow casting flames.  
Millions can suffer as one man. Each blames  
Himself. And while they beg the TV, Lie!  
Their faceless faces speak their nameless names.  
Now simple daylight on their doomed heads shames,  
And while they watch with a compulsive eye,  
His shadow casts a shadow casting flames.  
Their faceless faces speak their nameless names.

IV

Hearing the news, the anonymous woman on the named street,  
Lifts her hands to her face in a gesture of love and grief.  
Silent, her body moves, bent in the shape of a moan.  
Butchers and bakers, bankers, farmers of corn and wheat,  
Housewives and girls, we huddle together in disbelief,  
A human warmth, not wanting to bear this horror alone.

V

His life: to read, and then make, history,  
Marvel and misery of nations, men, wars, towns.  
Now he dies into living history,  
As rain becomes the river where it drowns.

IX

It was early morning November 23.  
The sun crawled unwillingly up the sky.  
Outside the gray-faced Post Office in Iowa City  
a little boy stood with his father watching  
an elderly man raising an American flag,  
which had more color in it than the heavy sun.  
The flag trembled in the autumn air.  
Abruptly the boy cried, pointing,  
"Look! It's stuck. He can't get it any higher.  
It's only half-way up. Can I go help?"  
The father slowly shook his head as if  
the muscles of his neck were tied;  
A middle-aged man on a medium street in the Middle West,  
his chin black with yesterday's beard,  
the pale white letters falling out of his hand,  
the pale, white tears falling out of his eyes.

X

I am ashamed to breathe when that man needs air.  
I am ashamed my heart beats when that man needs blood.  
I am ashamed that my ears listen to the words of his death  
when he is alone in that silence.  
I am ashamed that, although in war the enemy  
could not kill him,  
now in peace one of our own can.  
Why does not the sun, like a frightened bird,  
dart into space and leave this world dark?

Paul Engle is a poet and founder of the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa. These are excerpts from a longer poem entitled "John Fitzgerald Kennedy—On the Day He Was Shot."